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RITE OF PASSAGE: Graduates stream out of Dewan Unimas wreathed in smiles.

DEEP FRIENDSHIPS: Umaimah (far right) and her friends make the most of their post-convocation joy by taking as many photographs as possible to remember the day.

Joyful rites of passage for Unimas graduates

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IN Universiti Malaysia Sarawak's (Unimas) auditorium at the centre of its old campus, several hundred proud, excited and gleeful Unimas students sit anxiously in their seats.

Cloaked in songket-trimmed convocation robes and donning the iconic mortarboard on their heads, it's the proudest day in these students' academic career.

Despite the university's request for students to bring only a couple of family members to attend Unimas' 12th Convocation Ceremony, being Malaysians there is no such thing as leaving the family (and the extended family) behind.

As such, there is no empty seat in the family-only area, and it makes for a warm, jubilant gathering to celebrate these students' rite of passage.

Taking on a tertiary education is more than just studying for long hours in a library, attending lectures and seminars and just being 'there'.

The quality of university life is about growing as an adult; developing rich social relationships with peers and lecturers, as well as learning how to be responsible outside of the family nest.

Walking around the campus — post-convocation — is a wonderful time to discover how rich and enriching these relationships have been.

A crowd of friends from the Faculty of Electronic and Telecommunication Engineering are calling out to passing peers to take pictures.

The photo-taking process takes about 20 minutes, with everybody dishing out cameras to capture these once-in-a-lifetime moments in their robes and carrying congratulatory bouquets.

"University helps you learn more about your life, people's different cultures and backgrounds," Umaimah Ibrahim says about the difference between secondary school and university life.

With a blend of West Malaysian and foreign students at Unimas, Umaimah has been exposed to a world outside of Kuching and appreciated the chance.

She reveals that she will miss her friends and lecturers the most. "Going through university really teaches you how to be independent and look outwards instead of studying all the time," she says, citing various extra-curricular programmes she was involved in such as outreaches to villages and the Program Anak Angkat based in Sematan.

For Sabahan Shirley Voo Siew Nee, winning the Special Senate Award (Anugerah Khas Senat) was a surprising bolt from the blue.

"This was unexpected actually," she replies when asked how it feels to receive an award for her academic achievement. "A lot of my friends also got on the Dean's list, so it was a real surprise when I won the award."

The glass-encased award cradle in Voo's hand is a justifiably hefty prize that acknowledges her high CGPA (College Grade Point Average) of 3.85.

A Computer Science and Information Technology graduate, she comments that her academic career "was a hard climb! You have to do everything in three or four years, but all that effort was really worth it".

Contributing her time at university as a teaching assistant, she has already found her niche in the field of education and hopes to become a lecturer in her field and return to Unimas to teach.

Similarly Oscar Dousin also feels the pull of the lecture hall. Garnering the Chancellor's Award ("I felt so nervous when I got on the stage to receive it!"), he feels that the role of educator is "one of the precious gifts you could share with others".

"I want to be first professor!" the competitive 21-year-old adds with a big grin on his face.

With his education fully sponsored by the Sabah state government, the feisty Human Capital Management Major shared his day of success with his father, Dousin Tongkukui, who looks upon his son's graduation as nothing short of a blessing.

"I feel on top of the world," Dousin says ecstatically. "He deserves everything that he has worked hard for."

When asked how much work he put into university, Oscar says without a blink, "It was 110 per cent hard work, but then I think being successful in university means that you have find a good balance between your academic life and your social life — it's not just about studying all the time."

Oscar credits his work ethic and academic success to his parents who "have excelled in giving me a full education in all aspects; from home, school and church life, they have educated me so much."

Senate Special Award winner Tan Ai Tang views her success as the result of regular revision and attentiveness in class.

Winning the Best Student Project award from the Road Engineering Association Malaysia (REAM) for her highway design, she is proof that women can excel in a typically male domain and has already found work as a consultant at a private firm.

That being said, however, she doesn't feel the pressure of the workplace as much as she does being the first-born in her family.

"Since I'm the eldest, I have to be a role model for my younger siblings," she says, adding that she found university life to be a mixture of fun along with the normal stress and worry of projects and exams.

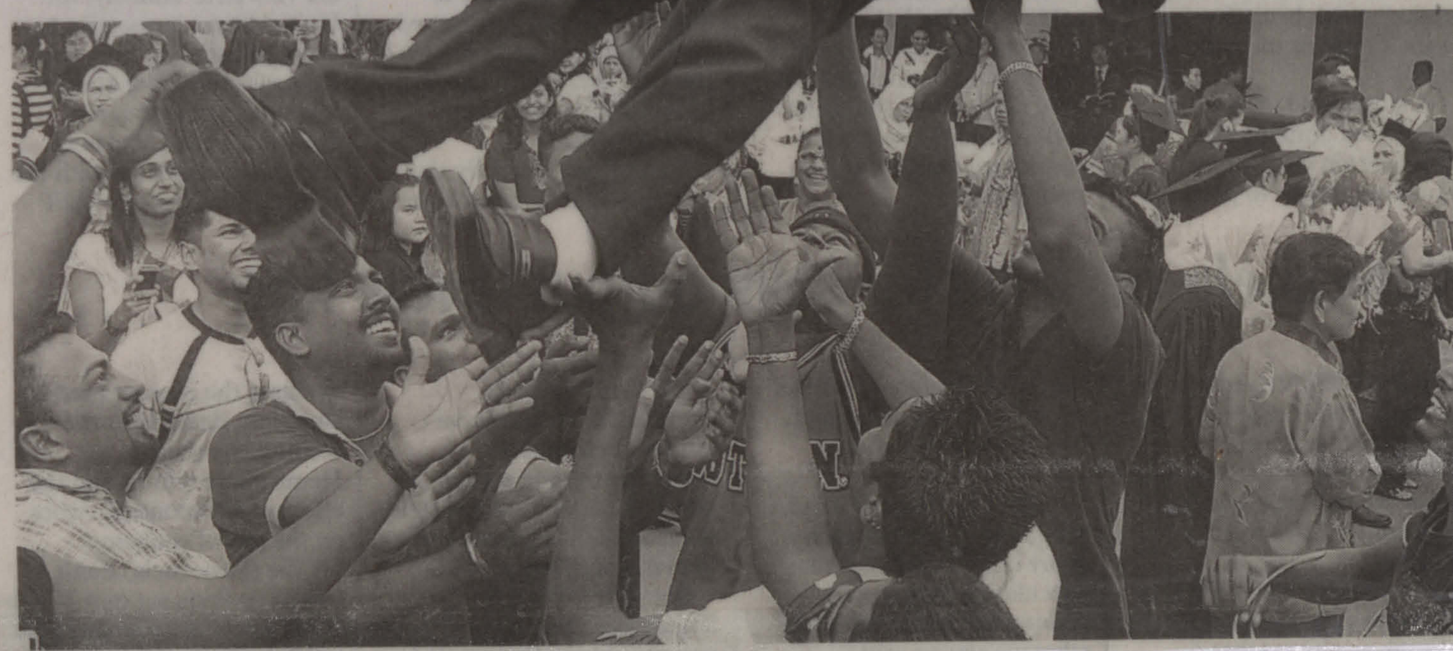
In the height of post-convocation excitement, Tay Peck Ling has only good things to say about university life. Even though she initially wasn't eager to further her studies after secondary school, her curiosity for learning new things won out.

Today, she has garnered her Mechanical and Manufacturing Engineering degree and appreciates her short time as a university student.

It isn't until university when students begin to learn the true meaning of 'freedom'. It isn't about total anarchy, but learning how to balance commitments and doing things one genuinely enjoys.

"With secondary school, you spend half-a-day to a day in school, and then you come back and have to do your homework. With university, the lifestyle is totally different; you can manage your own time, relax and have more freedom," reflects Tay.

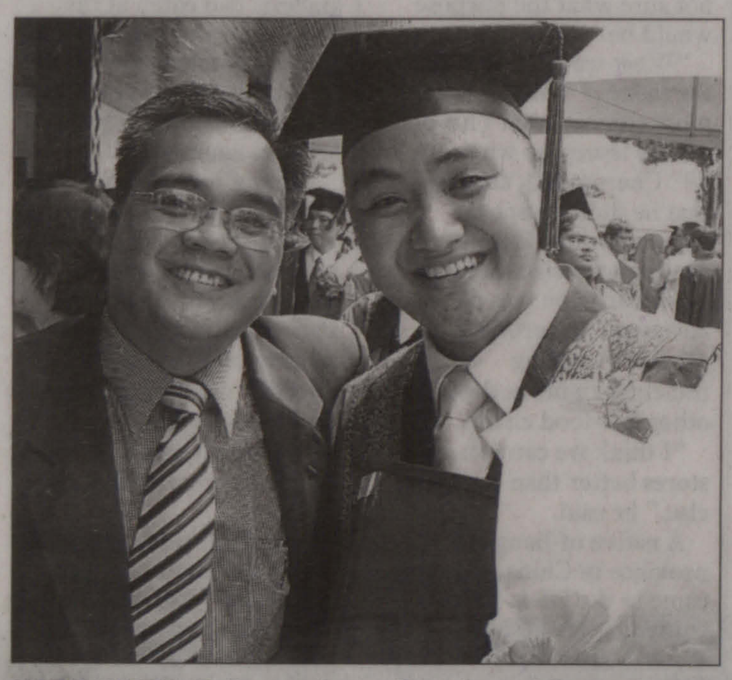
Koo Yoon Yin received his Electronic and Telecommunication Degree dressed in a spotless military uniform. Currently part of the Research Officer Training Unit (RO2 Unit) which was accredited by the Yang di-Pertuan Agong last year, this reserve officer sums things up when asked what he appreciated most about university: "With my gang of friends, we played together and studied together — there are just too many happy moments to pick out from the rest."



THRILLED: No one tossed their mortarboards into the air, but a lot of graduates were tossed into the air by their friends instead.

AN ACADEMIC LIFE: Academic excellence is demanding but with hopes to become a lecturer in her field of Computer Science and Information Technology, Voo is not quitting the university arena.

FUTURE LEADER: Civil Engineering graduate Tan Ai Tang proves that hard work, regular revision and attentiveness in class are key factors to succeeding in any field.



HARD WORK: Father and son, Dousin and Oscar, in high spirits over Oscar's graduation and his well-deserved Chancellor's Award.

HAPPY MOMENTS: University life is more than an academic stepping-stone, as it offers the chance of a lifetime to cultivate a solid work ethic and long-lasting camaraderie.